

Be aware of meningococcal meningitis

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) has received reports of three individuals diagnosed with meningococcal meningitis in the past couple months; two have been confirmed by laboratory testing. Meningococcal meningitis is rare in North Dakota and the United States. Prior to 2019, the last cases were reported in 2014. Meningococcal meningitis is a severe infection of the bloodstream and meninges (the thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) caused by the bacteria, *Neisseria meningitidis*.

“People in close contact with the individuals who tested positive have already been notified and placed on antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease,” said Jenny Galbraith, immunization surveillance coordinator with the NDDoH.

Meningococcal bacteria is spread by sharing respiratory and throat secretions (saliva or spit). Generally, it takes close (for example, coughing or kissing) or lengthy contact to spread these bacteria. Fortunately, they are not as contagious as germs that cause the common cold or flu.

According to Galbraith, “people do not catch the bacteria through casual contact or by breathing air where someone with meningococcal disease has been. People who are not a close contact of someone with meningococcal disease do not need antibiotics.”

Symptoms of a meningococcal infection include a fever along with either a severe headache, stiff neck or a rash. People experiencing meningococcal meningitis symptoms are urged to contact their primary health care provider.

“Getting vaccinated is the most effective way to prevent meningococcal meningitis,” said Galbraith. There are two types of meningococcal vaccines. Meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV4) protects against four serogroups (A, C, Y, and W-135) of *N. meningitidis* and is routinely recommended for all children 11 to 12 years of age. Adolescents should receive a booster dose at age 16. In North Dakota, all children entering seventh through tenth grade are required to be vaccinated with one dose of MCV4. Children entering eleventh through twelfth grade are required to be vaccinated with two doses of MCV4. North Dakota colleges and universities also require MCV4 vaccine. Active military are also routinely vaccinated with MCV4.

Vaccines that protect against *N. meningitidis* serogroup B (Men B) are also available but are not required for school. People ages 16 – 23 who want to be protected against Men B may be vaccinated. Younger children and adults usually do not need meningococcal vaccines. However, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends one or both types of meningococcal vaccines for people of all ages with certain medical conditions, travel plans, or jobs.

Maintaining healthy habits, like handwashing, getting plenty of rest, and not having close contact with people who are sick also helps prevent meningococcal disease.

For more information, contact the NDDoH Division of Disease Control at 701-328-2378. Information about meningococcal disease can be found at www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html.

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